



CALIFORNIA

PROFILES IN soil health

Jesse Sanchez

Firebaugh, CA

3,000 acres

Crops: Processing, fresh market tomatoes,
garbanzo beans, garlic, almonds, pistachios

Covers: Multi-species

unlock the
SECRETS
IN THE
SOIL

Quest to build better soil, helps build better business for California growers

Some people want to build better mousetraps. Jesse Sanchez wants to build better soil. It's been his goal, his passion, for a long, long time.

More than 20 years ago, when he was an employee of Sano Farms in Firebaugh, Calif., Sanchez asked his boss if he could experiment with cover crops (crops that keep cropland "covered" between the time a "cash crop" is harvested and the next one is planted) to see if they would improve the lower-producing areas of their fields. But his boss said "no." He didn't believe cover crops would make a difference.

Undaunted, Sanchez continued pitching his idea until his boss finally acquiesced, allowing him to plant cover



With an eye on the business' bottom line, Alan Sano says another important soil health benefit for Sano Farms is the cost savings associated with reduced fuel and machinery costs from reduced tillage operations.

crops in one field. After just one season of cover cropping, Sanchez said the next cash crop was a thing of beauty – the crops were uniform, healthy and abundant.

"Since that year, in my mind, I've had no doubt that I had to start putting cover crops in my fields to improve the soil," he said.

Now a partner in the farming operation with Alan Sano, Sanchez has been able to make building better soil a central theme of the Sano Farms business philosophy.

Sanchez' business partner believes that soil health-centric philosophy is also good for business.

"It's really important as far as the quality of the fruit as far as our tomatoes which is our main crop," Sano said. "Getting more organic matter in the soil really does help out a lot. It minimizes the soil tillage, makes it a lot mellower, and the quality of the fruit is a lot better."

The partners farm about 1,400 acres of permanent crops, including almonds and pistachios and 2,600 acres of row crops. Their customers also see a noticeable difference in the quality of crops grown in healthy soil.

"The buyers, they know right away the difference in quality," Sanchez said. "Sometimes we go into harvest and we have a schedule, but 20 loads later,

"...our fuel, labor and equipment costs went way down, not to mention improvements in water conservation."

-Alan Sano

the buyers and processors ask, 'Can you give me another five loads, or another eight loads?'" Another important soil health benefit for Sano Farms is tillage reduction – and the cost savings associated with reduced fuel and machinery costs.

"I think about all the heavy ground work we used to do, all the labor, all the big tractors – we had six, 400-500 horsepower tractors. But with minimum tillage, our fuel, labor and equipment costs went way down, not to mention improvements in water conservation," Sano said.

Through the years, Sanchez's love for the soil has only grown. He knows that healthy soils make healthy crops, which in turn, makes a healthy



"Once they see that difference in their soil, they are going to like it." Jesse Sanchez

business. "Our soil now compared to what it was when we used to work the conventional way – it's like day and night," he said. But as Sanchez talks with other farmers he tells them not to expect overnight miracles.

"I tell them it takes time. But after two or three years they will see the difference," he said. "Once they see that difference in their soil, they are going like it. I know farmers are scared to change, but we cannot avoid it. Everything has to change, nothing can be the same forever," he said. Sanchez has a near-evangelical zeal when talking about the hope soil health represents for agriculture and for the planet. He fervently believes building better soil can lead to a better world.

"If you have the good soils you're going to grow better products at a lower cost and you are going help the whole world. You won't waste fuel and you'll keep the carbon in the soil," he said. "I think that the whole world would change for the better if more farmers would try it and see the difference for themselves."

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